

Who's in Charge of Children's Environmental Health at School?

Jerome Paulson and Claire Barnett

Abstract:

Children spend many hours each week in and around school buildings. Their short- and long-term health outcomes and ability to learn are affected by numerous environmental factors related to the school buildings, the school grounds, the school transportation system, and the use of various products and materials in and around the school. Many school buildings are old, and they—and even newer buildings—can contain multiple environmental health hazards. While some districts self-report they have environmental health policies in place, no independent verification of these policies or their quality exists. Teachers and other staff, but not children who are more vulnerable to hazards than adults, are afforded some protections from hazards by Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) regulations, by their employment contracts, or through adult occupational health services. Major environmental problems include: indoor air quality, lighting, pests and pesticides, heavy metals and chemical management issues, renovation of occupied buildings, noise, and cleaning processes and products. No agency at the federal or state levels is charged with ensuring children's health and safety in and around school buildings. No systematic means exists for collecting data about exposures which occur in the school setting. **Recommendations are made for dealing with issues of data collection, federal actions, state and local actions, and for building the capacity of the Environmental Protection Agency and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention-designated and funded Pediatric Environmental Health Specialty Units (PEHSU) in responding to and evaluating risks to children's environmental health in schools.**

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